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ABSTRACT

This paper is about myths in general and the "myth" of Democracy in the United States of America in particular. Myths have a number of definitions among which legendary stories containing some elements of fact but wholly untrue can be cited as the basis for the establishment of commonly accepted beliefs. Myths can be functional in the sense that they serve a specific purpose or purposes. Among these, the binding together a political system such as ours may well be a vital function of the Democratic Myth in our society. Democracy, in its classical sense (where majorities rule; each member of the society participates in decisions affecting his life; opportunities for advancement are equally distributed; and so on), appears to be the inner faith to which our society looks inwardly for solace and comfort. Most of the time, however, the principles of such a system (democratic) are nowhere honored, either because they are impractical or simply impossible. That being the case, one wonders whether the Democratic Myth ought to be exposed for what it is, a Myth, or preserved and reinforced in homage to its utilitarian function. The true democrat must wrestle with the dilemma of either exposing the Myth in the belief that by so doing our society matures, or to the contrary, deny the existence of any myth and go on to play a democratic game in which rules are written but not practiced. To the extent that the Democratic Myth is incongruent with the realities of our democratic system the author suggests that it be discarded as inoperative. (Author)

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MYTH AND DEMOCRACY

by

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A B S T R A C T

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This paper is about myths in general and the "myth" of Democracy in the United States of America in particular. Myths have a number of definitions among which legendary stories containing some elements of fact but wholly untrue can be cited as the basis for the establishment of commonly accepted beliefs. Myths can be functional in the sense that they serve a specific purpose or purposes. Among these, the binding together a political system such as ours may well be a vital function of the Democratic Myth in our society. Democracy, in its classical sense (where majorities rule; each member of the society participates in decisions affecting his life; op portunities for advancement are equally distributed; and so on), appears to be the inner faith to which our society looks inwardly for solace and comfort. Most of the time, however, the principles of such a system (democratic) are nowhere honored, either because they are impractical or simply impossible. That being the case, one wonders whether the Democratic Myth ought to be exposed for what it is, a Myth, or preserved and reinforced in homage to its utilitarian function. The true democrat must wrestle with the dilemma of either exposing the Myth in the belief that by so doing our society matures, or to the contrary, deny the existence of any myth and go on to play a democratic game in which rules are written but not practiced. To the extent that the Democratic Myth is incongruent with the realities of our democratic system, I would suggest that it be discarded as inoperative.

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Myth and Democracy.

What is a Myth? The Oxford English Dictionary defines one as

> A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena.[1]

It is distinguished from "allegory" and "legend" by the implied body of facts that these terms connote.

At one time or another, "myth" meant, according to Eliade, that the story or sequence of events were fictitious, invented, or the subject of a "fable". At other times, and specifically during the last few decades, "myth" has meant to refer to a "true story," whose value is enhanced by the belief that it "is sacred, exemplary significant."[2]

Whether illusory or real, nevertheless, a "myth" itself is an event and, therefore, a part of the data which the social scientist must take into account in his attempt to understand social and political phenomena. To the extent that "myths" are believed and acted upon, they are influential, as Sabine put it, "not because they are true but because they are believed."[3] Myths are also "true" in a subjective, psychological way. They express "how reality appears in terms of our human feeling-qualities;" in this way, Bidney points out, "myth is real, just as every psychological experience is real to the subject."[4]

The important quality of the myth is not its degree of veracity (or falsehood) but the fact that it is believed. In general, "the foremost

function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities - diet or marriage, work or education, art or wisdom."[5] It is in this context, the function or role of a myth, that the myth of Democracy, for instance, takes on additional significance: that the United States' political system is a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Such a belief tends to cement the bonds of the political system however questionable the facts.

In its varied forms, myth can act as a communication agent when describing natural or unnatural phenomena through a variety of speech forms, words, and symbols. The rising and setting of the sun, for instance, was explained in Greek mythology in terms of gods and heroes; myths can and usually do have religious connotations (as Biblical stories indicate because they offer answers to questions fundamental in human existences) and they are believed. Psychological and sociological aspects of myths are also analyzed in the works of notables such as Freud, Jung, Malinowski, and others.[6] However, this paper is concerned primarily with what may be termed political myths.

Political Myth. A particular kind of myth is the political myth. Tudor points out that there is nothing structurally different about a political myth to set it apart from other myths: "The kinds of assumptions and reasonings found in political myths are the same as those found in any other kind." It is the subject matter, however, that identifies a myth as being political. "Just as nature myths deal with natural phenomena and religious myths deal with gods and their worship, so political myths deal with politics."[7] The myths of the "dictatorship of the ploretariat" or the "Thousand-Year Reich" are cases in point.

The political myth deals specifically with the "polis" which is the "essence of political society;" Plato sought to demonstrate how it "arises psychologically and how teleologically fits into the implicit ends of human

nature."[8] The political myth, moreover, attempts to explain or justify the birth, the development, and the existence of a group, tribe, or nation; it also explains the relevant phenomena of the group, i.e., its objectives, goals, enemies, values, pathos, and beliefs. Furthermore, says Tudor, "where the myth is the story of a political society already in existence, it may sanctify the constitution of that society, inspire its members with confidence in their destiny and glorify their achievements."[9]

In this paper, the political myth concerned is that which justifies, supports, and reinforces the Democratic Creed. C.W. Mills synthesized the "accepted" democratic concept of the political system as follows:

> In this classic image, the people are presented with problems. They discuss them. They formulate viewpoints. These viewpoints are organized, and they compete. One viewpoint 'wins out.' Then the people act on this view, or their representatives are instructed to act it out, and this they promptly do. Such are the images of democracy which are still used as working justifications of power in America,

As Mills so bluntly put it, "we must recognize this description as more a fairy tale than a useful approximation."[10] In other words, the democratic image is, simply, a Myth.

It is not difficult to realize, then, that a political myth may well be the "élan vital" of a society, whose socio-economic and political development depend entirely upon the observance of the myth's dicta. It is at this point that one must consider the consequences to be expected from the substitution of the powerful, destructive thrust of reason and its fellow-traveler, "the scientific enterprise," upon the political myth. Can a society survive if its "indispensable myth" is destroyed? Perhaps not. However, this is the social scientist's dilemma: should he continue to support a myth "becuase of its pragmatic social function" or should he

take the political myth only seriously enough " in order that it may be gradually superseded in the interests of the advancement of truth and the growth of human intelligence."[11]

Myth and Democracy. The "élan vital" or essential imperative for the survival of the political system of the United States is embodied in the principles or tenets of the Democratic Creed. It is well to point out that, when pressed for definitions, the sophisticated analyst stresses the idea of "representative Democracy or Republicanism" as the true image of our political system. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, with or without representation, the political system is supposed to reflect the fundamentals of democratic government, in which the "people" govern.

A number of contemporary social scientists have consciously and deliberately analyzed the United States' political system in such a way as to leave no doubt that, in this political system, values are "authoritatively allocated" and politicies are the result of a "pluralist" play in which the people's demands and needs are democratically met. In describing Easton's conceptual scheme about the functioning of a political system, for instance, Ranney leaves no doubt about the participation of the "people" in the political system: as Ranney put it,

> Most people expressing such demands, as well as most others not directly concerned about the military-manpower issue, express their support of usual American way of handling such disputes. The demands (of the people) enter the political system and trigger various conversion processes.[12]

Eventually, the people's demands are acted upon and the system's output reflects, presumably, policies which meet most people's needs. Similarly, Dahl's well-known study about the democratic structure and workings of the political system has led to the conclusion, among many political scientists, that the

interplay of groups in this society reflects a democratic process through which the "people's" will is ascertained and, presumably, carried out. As Ferguson and McHenry put it, in the political system, "formal and informal structures mirror one another in form and temper to such a degree that it is unlikely that one can be democratic unless the other is also."[13] As further summarized by Dye and Zeigler, the Democratic Creed is based on the following ideas:

1. popular participation in the decisions that shape the lives of individuals in a society.

2. government by majority rule, with recognition of the rights of minorities to try to become majorities. These rights include the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and petition and the freedom to dissent, to form opposition parties, and to run for public office.

3. a commitment to individual dignity and the preservation of the liberal values of life, liberty, and property.

4. a commitment to equal opportunity, for all men to develop their individual capacities.[14]

These ideas, as a whole, embody the political myth which attempts to justify the birth, development, and existence of this political system. To the extent that most people believe in the precepts of the Democratic Myth, the latter acquires the mantle of legitimacy required for the sustenance and continuity of the political system. However, if the Democratic Myth is found to be inoperative at the procedural level, that is at the level where the precepts are applied, then it is possible that its utility as the binding cement of a political system will end. Obviously, a sustaining myth, if eliminated, must be replaced by another concept no less sustaining.[15]

Is the Democratic Myth inoperative? The answer might be found, objectively, by means of analytical, empirical tools: Opinion polls, surveys, random sample interviewing and their statistical companions (correlations, regressions, tests of significance, and the like) might determine the extent of the Myth's

existence; while, subjectively, the Myth is a functioning reality as long as it is believed. However, one needs not resort to such empirical devices to ascertain, first hand, the non-operational characteristics of the Democratic Myth. It appears that more and more segments of the population are becoming aware of the incongruencies found between the Democratic Myth and its ability to explain the workings of the political system.

As indicated by Arthur H. Miller, "a situation of widespread, basic discontent and political alienation is the existing condition in the United States today."[16] While in 1960 about 42 percent of the population felt that the political system was not so complicated that they could not understand "what's going on," by 1970 only 26 percent felt so certain.[17] The amount of alienation and nonparticipation of the public at large in this political system is also underscored by Dye and Zeigler, who indicate that "as distrust of government soars, the alienated tend to be more evenly distributed among all (sic.) population groups, rather than concentrating among the traditional have-nots."[18] Thus, it appears that the Democratic Myth might be found to be inconsistent with the realities of the political system. This might not be so obvious to the average citizen who, nevertheless, might be feeling alienated without realizing exactly why; but, it should become obvious to the inquisitive analyst.

One must ask, to repeat, should the social scientist expose the Democratic Myth as irrelevant to the realities of the workings of the political system, or should he continue to support the Political Myth in the assumption that it appears to be relevant? I, personally, feel that the Democratic Myth ought to be denounced as nonworkable in terms of the realities of our political system, as further summarized below.

1. In terms of popular participation in the decisions affecting one's life, it should be obvious that such participation is not feasible nor

practical. In a political system of over 210 million people, it is impossible for the individual, adult or nonadult alike, to participate directly or indirectly in the myriad of decisions affecting his life. To alleviate this situation, the structure of a "representative" government, through which the majority of the people's will can be ascertained, has been developed. However, it is also obvious that none of our "representatives" is ever contacted by a majority of their constituents. In the final analysis, small groups of interested and active citizens, at times supported by some elected officials and by a larger number of people voting, are the few who decide for all the individuals in society.[19] In other words, very few, not the majority of the people, participate in the making of decisions affecting the people.

2. The inconsistencies found under 1 above can be reconciled, the Democratic Myth suggests, through the application of the concept of majority rule, with recognition of the right of the minorities to become majorities. However, this rationale implies that there is a communality of interests and an awareness of the fundamental issues affecting the political system on the part of the majority of the people. The fact is that the "opinion" of the majority of the people on public issues and policy is inconsistent, unstable, unprincipled, and uninformed. Relatively few voters are knowledgeable and informed enough to hold consistent beliefs.[20]

3. The decision-making process lies largely in the hands of the few. It is they who are in a position to decide the course and direction of the future. Then, contrary to the Democratic Myth, the political system fails to contribute to the growth and development of the individual and, hence, undermines the individual's dignity. In other words, the individuals's rights to determine the course of his life, degree of freedom, and the preservation of property is grossly limited.

4. Finally, the Democratic Myth implies a commitment to equal opportunity for all individuals to develop their talents. Contrary to the Democratic Myth, however, the realities of this political system clearly indicate that individual mobility is greatly limited. In fact, the persistence of income inequalities in the sytem belies the assumed equality of opportunity implied in the Democratic Myth: there has been no significant change in the percentage of the national income received by the top and the bottom fifth income-earners in the last fifty years: "In 1910, the top fifth of income earners received 46 percent of the national income; today, the richest fifth's share is still over 40 percent. The share of the bottom fifth has actually declined from over 8 percent in 1910 to just over 5 percent today."[21] Furthermore, the inequality of the tax law contributes to the maintenance of an income distribution system which is far from being equal. As Philip M. Stern points out, the larger the family income the larger the percentage of income saved through the nonpayment of taxes, as the following figures illustrate:[22]

* for a family with this much income	this is the percent of income saved after using loopholes in the tax law
$ 2,000-3,000	1.4%
10,000-11,000	4.8%
20,000-25,000	8.7%
75,000-100,000	19.2%
200,000-500,000	28.4%
Over $1 million	31.0%

*Figures taken from a Brookings Institution study table shown in Stern's book The Rape of the Taxpayer (Random House, Inc.,1972), p. 11.

The new 1975 tax law recently signed by President Ford has not changed the unequal characteristic of income distribution in this political system.

As Jack Anderson indicated in a recent column, "the new law opens loopholes for some, closes them for others... adding to the complexities and inconsistencies that have made our tax code our greatest single source of inequity..."[23] Thus, it is difficult to believe that opportunities for advancement in society can be equally available to all individuals when wealth, a basic opportunity opener in a capitalist society, is so unequally distributed.

Education and race, in addition, can be cited as areas where our Democratic Myth has proved to be most incongruous: As believed, the Myth suggests that the higher the education of the individual the higher his income and that, as an equalizer, education will ignore the race or color of the individual in education's egalitarian thrust. However, as the following figures indicate, the value of education to blacks is inversely proportional in terms of constant dollars:[24]

years of schooling	median income Black Male	White Male
Less than 8	$3,000	$3,600
12	6,100	8,600
15	7,100	9,600
More than 16	8,600	12,400

Source: "Current Population Reports," in Dye and Zeigler's The Irony of Democracy.

Furthermore, eventhough blacks have achieved some economic gains, they continue to fall behind whites. As Dye and Zeigler point out, "in 1952, the difference in per capita income between the two races was $1,415; in 1966 it was $2,908; in 1972, it was $4,685."[25] It can be seen, then, that the equality of opportunity feature of the Democratic Myth remains far from being the reality that the believers of the Myth want it to be.

Conclusion. In conclusion, then, I submit that the Democratic Myth can no longer justify or explain the functioning of our political system. Contrary to what we wish to believe, majority rule cannot be substantiated; minority rights are still much in jeopardy; individual participation in decisions affecting one's life is practically nonexistent; and that inequalities are not only obvious in our system, but that they produce unequal distribution of power and influence. Therefore, it appears to me that these conditions - the non-operational feature of the Democratic Myth- ought to be made known to the public at large in order that a more realistic understanding of the workings of our political system can be achieved. Presumably, such an understanding, to the extent that it comes closer to reality, would go a long way in sustaining man-"qua"-man in his traditional search for truth.

Rafael A. Lecuona

April, 1975

Footnotes

[1]The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, Vol. 1, 3rd ed., 1973).

[2]Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality (N.Y.: Harper and Row, Publishers, "Torchbooks" edition, 1968), p. i.

[3]George H. Sabine, "What Is A Political Theory? in Gould and Thursby, Contemporary Political Thought (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, 1969), p. 16.

[4]David Bidney, "Myth, Symbolism and Truth," in Myth: A Symposium, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 3rd. ed. 1970), p.12.

[5]Eliade, p.8.

[6]Henry Tudor summarizes the main interpretations of myth. See his Political Myth (Pall Mall Press, London, 1972) for additional analyses of the meaning of myths and their structure, function, and so on. Also see Myth: A Symposium., op. cit.

[7]Tudor, p. 17.

[8]Mulford Q. Sibley, Political Ideas and Ideologies (Harper and Row, 1970), p.66.

[9]Tudor, p. 139.

[10]C.W. Mills Powers, Politics and People (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1963), ch. 1.

[11]Bidney, p. 10.

[12]Austin Ranney, Governing: A Brief Introduction to Political Science (Holt , Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), p. 8.

[13]John H. Ferguson and Dean E. McHenry, The American System of Government (McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1971), p.20. For the "pluralist" view of the United States political system, see Robert Dahl, Pluralist Democracy in the United States (Ill.: Rand McNally and Co., 1967).

[14]Thomas Dye and L. Harmon Zeigler, The Irony of Democracy (Mass.: Duxbury Press, 3rd. ed., 1975), p. 9.

[15] Schompeter, indicated the need for an alternative to the democratic myth when suggested that we accept "another theory which is much truer to life and at the same time salvages much of what sponsors of the democratic method really mean by this terms." See his Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). For other alternatives to the democratic myth, see also Ira Katznelson and Mark Kesselman, The Politics of Power (N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975). Katznelson and Kesselman refine the democratic myth and suggest fundamental structural change leading to a socialist system. Another alternative is offered by Dye and Zeigler who perceive the United States political system as a democracy thanks to ironically, the works of an elite. See their The Irony of Democracy.

[16] Arthur H. Miller, "Public Policy and Political Cynicism: 1964-1970" in Norman R. Luttbeg (ed.) Public Opinion and Public Policy (Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1974), p. 453

[17] Miller, p. 454.

[18] Dye and Zeigler, p. 219. For further discussuon of political alienation and social change, see A.W. Finifter, "Dimensions of Political Alienation," American Political Science Review (June, 1970). See also Philip E. Converse, "Change in the American Electorate," in Angus Campbell and Philip E. Converse, eds. The Humane Meaning of Social Change (N.Y.: Russell Sage Foundation, 1972).

[19] See Aaron Wildavsky, Leadership in a Small Town (N.J.: Bedminster Press, 1964) for an analysis of "pluralist" government. Also, Robert Dahl's Pluralist Democracy....

[20] See among others: Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes, The American Voter (N.Y.: Wiley, 1960); Philip Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in David Apter, ed., Ideology and Discontent (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1964). Also, for a different view about the lack of ideology on the part of the masses, see Gerald M. Pomper, "From Confusion to Clarity: Issues and American Voters, 1956-1968" in Luttbeg's Public Opinion and Public Policy, op. cit. On page 135, Pomper concludes that there is "an increased awareness of politics among American voter."

[21] Katznelson and Kesselman, p. 20.

[22] Philip M. Stern, The Rape of the Taxpayer (N.Y.: Random House, Vintage Books, 1972), p. 11.

[23] Jack Anderson, "The Washington Merry-Go-Round," San Antonio Express (Texas: April 3, 1975), p. 15-A.

[24] Dye and Zeigler, p. 421.

[25] Dye and Zeigler, p. 421.

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